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Emotion and Crime: a mixed methods study

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## **RESEARCH REPORT**

**RES-00-22-2434**

### **Emotion and crime: a mixed-methods approach**

#### **Background:**

Most of the research into emotional responses to crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) has been conducted within the 'fear of crime' paradigm. Fear of crime emerged as a topic in the USA during the early 1970's (Lee, 2006), and is now a frequent focus of UK public concern and an object of government policy. Since the annual British Crime Survey (BCS) began in 1982 it has included a measure of fear of crime; the BCS and other surveys (on mainland Europe, as well as in the UK and USA) consistently find that significant proportions of the population report themselves to be 'worried' or 'very worried' to go out at night. In recent years, government initiatives such as the high-profile 'Respect' agenda have aimed to tackle both crime and the fear associated with it by promoting a broader remit including everyday incivilities and ASB (Home Office, 2009).

Although reported levels of fear of crime have fallen from a high of 58% in the early 1980's (Chambers & Tombs 1984) recent surveys still suggest significant levels of fear, and it has sometimes been proposed that, particularly for groups such as the elderly, fear of crime is a bigger problem than crime itself (Bennett, 1990). Fear of crime may be gendered, with most studies finding that women are more fearful than men, although one study attributes this to social desirability response bias and suggests that, on average, men may be more fearful than women (Sutton & Farrall, 2005). Evidence consistently suggests that the elderly, poorer people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more fearful (Hale, 1996; Mayhew, 1989; Pain, 1997, 2000).

Despite its obvious relevance, psychology has contributed relatively little to research into fear of crime (Gabriel & Greve, 2003) and most studies have been informed by conceptually problematic (Griffiths, 1998) 'common sense' notions of fear. There have been calls for more psychological input to the paradigm (Farrall, Bannister, Ditton & Gilchrist, 2000), and some criminologists have begun considering social psychological dimensions and models (e.g. Jackson, 2004). However, there are other psychological perspectives on emotion (including neuroscientific, experimental psychological, discursive psychological and conversation analytic approaches) that have so far contributed little.

As the fear of crime paradigm has developed, scholars have increasingly recognised that it raises intertwined conceptual and methodological issues (Gray, Jackson & Farrall, in press). Fattah & Sacco (1989) noted that early research frequently failed to distinguish between reasonable caution and actual fear, a concern that continues to be expressed (Tulloch, 2004). It has been suggested that measures might actually be assessing fear of strangers, quality of neighbourhood life, or assessments of the probable future risk of being a victim of crime. Jackson (2004) suggests that measures may tap both an experiential dimension of actual fear, and an expressive dimension which gathers up symbolically important but vague concerns crystallised by crime and disorder. Until recently, most studies have relied upon forced-choice answers to versions of the so-called 'standard question': "How safe do you feel/would you feel being out alone in your neighbourhood at night?" (Hale, 1996). The problems of treating such self-report

measures as transparently indicative of emotional states like fear are well-known in psychology (e.g. Davis & Rose, 2000; Edwards, 1999). Criminologists, similarly, have observed that their measures mix the hypothetical with the actual, contain subtle biases, lack temporal and spatial specificity, exclude other emotions, and consequently might overstate the prevalence of fear of crime (Hale, 1996; Tulloch, 2004; Gray, Jackson & Farrall, 2008; Farrall & Gadd, 2004).

In response to such concerns there has been increased interest in the patterning and ecology of everyday emotions (Gray, Jackson & Farrall, in press), and questions in the BCS have recently been modified to assess both the frequency of fear of crime and its differentiation with respect to different kinds of offence (Gray, Jackson & Farrall, 2008). Scholars have also responded to these concerns by conducting qualitative research, and these studies have similarly found that fear of crime is more variable, transitory and situational than surveys suggest (Pain 1997, 2000). Qualitative research has also shown that fear of crime takes on different qualities according to social roles and positions, and so gets manifested differentially for children, parents, older adults and ethnic minorities (Nayak, 2003; Tulloch, 2004; Tulloch, 2000; Chakraborti & Garland, 2003). An influential psychologically-informed strand of qualitative research has explored participants' and researchers' defensive and defended responses to crime, showing how fear of crime is sensitive to the particulars of lived experience and manifested within the context of specific life circumstances and personal biographies (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997; Gadd & Jefferson, 2007). Studies have also shown that emotions other than fear arise, and that people's own definitions of crime often differ from those of researchers (Lupton 1999, Van Der Veen 1988). However, whilst there are some ethnographic studies of fear of crime, most studies rely upon interviews or focus groups and there is no published research employing psychological analysis of naturally-occurring talk.

The study reported here speaks to these concerns and omissions by employing discursive psychological and conversational analytic methods to analyse naturally occurring talk, recorded at the meetings of community groups in a high-crime, deprived inner city area. Because these were conversations that would have occurred anyway, the definitions of crime within them, and their associated emotional responses, were wholly unconstrained by research agendas (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Consequently, our analyses of these conversations provide insights into the social and emotional processes of dealing with and responding to crime-related concerns as people go about aspects of their everyday lives.

### **Objectives:**

The aim of the research was to investigate emotional responses to crime by conducting detailed analyses of the meetings of a community group in a high crime, inner city area. This was to be achieved by addressing five more specific objectives. None of these more specific objectives were changed or abandoned during the life of the project, and all were met. Each is listed below, together with a brief summary of how it was addressed.

- 1 *Analyse how crime is constructed by participants*  
This objective was met by identifying and analysing all of the participant's talk about crime and anti-social behaviour (see both nominated outputs)
- 2 *Identify and characterise participants' emotional responses to crime*

This objective was met by identifying all instances of heightened emotionality in the data and analysing those relevant to crime and anti-social behaviour (see both nominated outputs)

3 *Analyse the ways in which emotional responses to crime impact upon the group's decision-making*

This objective was met by exploring the associations between the participant's emotional responses to crime and anti-social behaviour and the ways they reasoned and deliberated about these issues (see nominated output 'Constructing Crime, Enacting Morality')

4 *Draw conclusions that might be of use to this and other similar community groups*

This objective was met by discussing our findings with the participants, and by relating them to existing literature on community social psychology (described in a third paper)

5 *Draw conclusions that might speak to current debates concerning the measurement and theoretical conceptualisation fear of crime*

This objective was met by drawing out the implications of our results for current debates in this area (see nominated output 'Constructing Crime, Enacting Morality')

## **Method:**

The research took place in a deprived inner city area of Nottingham, UK. Nottingham has been notorious for crime in recent years, and the inner-city area where the research took place is characterised by significant levels of deprivation, poverty, unemployment, drug use, ill health and disability. The area is ethnically mixed, with a large transient student population and high levels of recorded crime: the 2008 BCS reported 102 offences per thousand people in this area (compared to a national average of 50).

We approached a local charity working to improve the standard of community life in the area by forging links between business, local institutions and concerned individuals. With their permission, we attended and audio-recorded the meetings of two groups that operate under their aegis: the 'Tidy Our Community' (TOC) group and the 'Watch Our Community' (WOC) group. The work of both groups is relevant to crime and ASB: the well-known 'broken windows' theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) links crime and ASB to neighbourhood disorder, whilst the WOC group take community safety as their explicit focus.

We initially planned to attend and record only TOC meetings, because the charity recommended that this was their most dynamic and active group. Preliminary analyses of data from this group showed that emotional responses to crime and ASB were enacted, but were more varied than we had anticipated and fear was very seldom present. Consequently, we also approached the WOC group and asked for permission to record their meetings. This enabled us to also analyse discussions from meetings where crime and ASB were the explicit focus of discussion, and to ensure that our findings were not simply an artefact of the workings of one group.

Over the three years from 2006-2009 we recorded 18 meetings (thirteen TOC, 5 WOC), providing a representative sample of conversations occurring over a reasonably long period of time. This yielded a total of 24 hours of recorded discussion for analysis.

Data were first of all transcribed for content by a professional transcription service. Data in these transcripts were then coded and categorised to reflect relevant aspects of its character. Selected extracts of data were then re-transcribed in greater detail, using Jeffersonian notation (Jefferson, 1985) to capture the vocal dimensions of the emotions being enacted. Features of talk such as intonation, pitch and volume shifts, overlaps and rapid turn-taking were transcribed, and then analysed using conversation and discursive psychological analytic techniques.

## **Results:**

Our findings fell into three main areas:

### *Emotional responses to crime and ASB*

Whilst emotional responses to crime and ASB were quite varied, relatively little fear was either enacted or described. Not only did the groups fail to describe or reproduce any overt fear of crime in their own deliberations and decisions, they almost never attributed it to others in their community. Rather than fear there was occasional nervousness or 'not feeling safe', but even these feelings were confined to situations where any reasonable person might be wary and so were most accurately characterised as reasonable caution. Across the corpus as a whole we identified five distinct clusters of emotional responding to crime and ASB. These were:

- 1) Nervousness, not feeling safe and intimidation
- 2) Humour and amusement
- 3) Anger and indignation
- 4) Irritation and frustration
- 5) Resignation

Further analysis failed to reveal any kind of pattern associating different emotions either with different kinds of crime and ASB, or with its perceived seriousness.

### *Morality, crime and ASB*

We found that participant's constructions of crime were inextricably bound up with the assertion of moral positions. Asserting these moral positions was frequently, although not always, associated with emotion displays. We identified three ways in which moral positions were enacted:

- 1) using moral categories (e.g. responsibility, consideration and respect)
- 2) working up moral hierarchies (e.g. distinguishing between different kinds of person cycling on the pavement, and between different kinds of drug dealer)
- 3) invoking vulnerable others (e.g. children, wheelchair users, older people)

We found that the participant's moral judgements both accord with, and differ from, those enshrined in law and in current government policy. For example, our participants marked a sharp distinction between cannabis dealing, which they constructed as relatively harmless, and heroin and crack-cocaine dealing. Similarly, 'respect' was an important moral category in their talk, but was applied to businesses, the police and the local council, as well as to street drinkers, fly tippers, noisy neighbours and so on.

### *Enacting a sense of Community*

The participants constructed themselves as representatives of an 'imagined community', with responsibility for a specific, bounded geographical area and necessary relationships

with wider communities (e.g. the city and its institutions). In their meetings, 'community' became a resource, enacted and jointly affirmed in ways that allowed them to work up social capital in their dealings with each other and with other organisations. We identified five strategies for enacting this sense of community:

- 1) Affirming the community's moral code (e.g. with respect to consuming alcohol in public)
- 2) Supporting community members (e.g. pushchair users, children)
- 3) Distinguishing outsiders (e.g. noisy students and Polish travellers) from insiders
- 4) Enacting empowerment (e.g. in recruiting Council assistance to resolve problems)
- 5) Challenging the wider community (e.g. in lobbying the Council about traffic at a pedestrian crossing)

These five strategies were all bound up with moral judgements and emotion displays. Together, they allowed participants to transform 'community' from an abstract ideal into a tangible, empowering resource.

### **Activities**

- 1) A summary of findings was presented to the charity whose groups supported the research in a presentation on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2009
- 2) A subset of the findings were presented at the British Psychological Society Social Psychology Section conference in Sheffield on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009
- 3) A 'plain English' summary of the research project has been written for the charity whose groups enabled the research

### **Outputs**

To date, three academic journal papers based upon the research are in the final stages of preparation. These are:

- 1) Emotion and crime in a deprived inner city area: analysing the talk of community groups  
(target: British Journal of Social Psychology)
- 2) Constructing crime, enacting morality: emotion, crime and anti-social behaviour in an inner-city community  
(target: British Journal of Criminology)
- 3) 'It all boils down to respect, doesn't it?': enacting a sense of community in a deprived inner city area  
(target: Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology)

### **Impacts**

In August 2009 we were asked by the charity whose groups enabled the research if we were able to present a summary of the findings at a gathering of community groups which they were attending. Unfortunately, the request came at very short notice and we were unable to take part due to other commitments. This nevertheless suggests that the findings have some wider relevance and applicability to such groups.

## Future Research Priorities

Our study raises both empirical and methodological possibilities that may be worthy of further investigation.

Empirically, we found a relatively wide array of emotional responses to crime and ASB. It would be particularly interesting to discover whether this variety could be replicated in other settings; if so it would have important consequences for how we understand and assess fear of crime. Our findings may also speak to the perceived need to relate fear of crime research to the ecology of everyday emotion, and so might stimulate further research in this vein.

A set of broader empirical questions raised by this research flow from the ways in which our participants' emotions were linked to their moral reasoning. The psychological literature describes a relatively circumscribed set of 'moral emotions': not only did we find a wider range of emotions enacted in relation to morality, we also found occasions where overt emotion was absent but conversations nevertheless appeared 'pregnant' with emotional force. Both of these findings are worthy of further investigation.

Our study also illuminates an ongoing methodological research agenda, currently being supported by the ESRC in a series of workshops on "Researching Affect and Affective Communication". Our findings suggest that it is possible to use the combination of Jeffersonian notion and conversation analytic techniques to reliably identify and explore the ways that affects are enacted in everyday conversation. If we are correct, our work may prove useful to the many social scientists currently seeking a sound methodological approach to the study of affect.

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